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background notes

Costa Rica

United States Department of State
Bureau of Public Affairs

March 1989

Official Name: Republic of Costa Rica

PROFILE

Geography

Area: 51,032 sq. km. (19,652 sq. mi.), slightly smaller than West Virginia. **Cities:** *Capital*—San Jose (metropolitan population 890,434). *Other cities*—Alajuela (34,556), Limon (33,925), Golfito (29,043). **Terrain:** A rugged, central massif runs the length of the country separating coastal plains. **Climate:** Tropical and subtropical.

People

Nationality: *Noun and adjective*—Costa Rican(s). **Population** (1988): 2.7 million. **Annual growth rate** (1987): 2.67%. **Density:** 55.27/sq. km. (143.49 sq. mi.). **Ethnic groups:** white (including a few mestizos), 96%; black, 3%; Indian, 1%. **Religion:** Roman Catholic 95%. **Language:** Spanish, with Jamaican dialect of English spoken around Puerto Limon. **Education:** *Years compulsory*—6. *Attendance*—nearly 100%. *Literacy*—93.1%. **Health:** *Infant mortality rate*—15.2/1,000. *Life expectancy*—men, 67.5 years; women, 71.9 years. **Work force** (965,300, 1987): *Agriculture*—32%. *Industry and commerce*—25%. *Services and government*—38%. *Banking and finance*—5%.

Government

Type: Democratic republic. **Independence:** September 15, 1821. **Constitution:** November 9, 1949.

Branches: *Executive*—president (head of government and chief of state) elected for a single 4-yr. term, two vice presidents, Cabinet (16 ministers). *Legislative*—57-deputy unicameral Legislative Assembly elected at 4-yr. intervals. *Judicial*—Supreme Court of Justice (17 magistrates elected by Legislative Assembly at 8-yr. intervals).

Subdivisions: Seven provinces divided into 80 cantons that are subdivided into districts.

Political parties: Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC), National Liberation Party (PLN), Popular Vanguard Party (PVP), Costa Rican People's Party (PPC), Costa Rican Socialist Party (PSC). **Suffrage:** Obligatory over age 18.

Central government budget (1987): $791.6 million.

Defense: Costa Rica has no army.

Holiday: Independence Day, September 15.

Flag: Two blue horizontal stripes top and bottom, two white inner stripes, and a wide, red central band with the national coat of arms.

Economy

GDP (1987): $4.29 billion. **Real growth rate** (1987): 3.9%. **Per capita income** (1987): $1,584. **Inflation** (1987 consumer price index change): 16.4%.

Natural resources: Hydroelectric power.

Agriculture (18% of GDP): *Products*—bananas, coffee, beef, sugarcane, grain.

Industry (23% of GDP): *Types*—food processing, textiles and clothing, construction materials, fertilizer.

Trade (1987): *Exports*—$1,114 million: coffee, bananas, beef, sugar, cocoa. *Major markets*—US 41%, Central American Common Market (CACM) 9%, FRG 9%. *Imports*—$1,385 million: manufactured goods, machinery, transportation equipment, chemicals, fuel, foodstuffs, fertilizer. *Major suppliers*—US 35%, CACM 8%, Japan 15%.

Exchange rate: *Market rate*—76.10 colones = US$1 (August 1988).

Fiscal year: Calendar year.

US economic aid received (1987): $120 million.

Debt service charges as % of exports: 76% in 1987.

Membership in International Organizations

UN and some of its specialized and related agencies, including the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), International Development Association (IDA), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), International Labor Organization (ILO), Interparliamentary Union (IPU), International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Health Organization (WHO); International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Organization of American States (OAS); Central American Common Market (CACM); Inter-American Development Bank (IDB); Latin American Economic System (SELA).

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Lago de Nicaragua
NICARAGUA
Caribbean Sea
NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN
PANAMA
ALAJUELA
HEREDIA
GUANACASTE
PUNTARENAS
CARTAGO
LIMON
SAN JOSE
Rivas
San Juan del Sur
Cabo
San Carlos
Nueva Guinea
Punta Gorda
Río Indio
La Cruz
Las Chilas
San Juan del Norte
Hacienda Miravalles
Golfo de Papagayo
Caza
Liberia
Guardia
Cañas
Arenal
Pital
Puerta Vieja
Quesada
Tamarindo
Santa Cruz
Nicoya
Puerto Jesus
Barranca
Alajuela
Heredia
Guácimo
Siquirres
Matina
Puerto Limón
Liverpool
Turrialba
Santiago
San José
Cartago
San Ignacio
Atalanta
Jabillo
Naranjo
Golfo de Nicoya
San Marcos
Puerto Quepos
Dominical
San Isidro
Palmar Sur
Drake
Golfo Dulce
Puerto Jiménez
Golfito
Corredor
San Vito
Bajo Boquete
La Concepción
Puerto Armuelles
Bahía de Charco Azul
Costa Rica
International boundary
Province boundary
National capital
Province capital
Railroad
Road
0 25 50 Kilometers
0 25 50 Miles

GEOGRAPHY

Located in a narrow strip between Panama and Nicaragua, Costa Rica is the second smallest Central American country. The terrain is mostly rugged mountains and hills cut by many streams and rivers. More than half the country is forested. A fairly wide coastal plain in the east is mirrored by a narrower plain along the Pacific coast. Three volcanic mountain ranges extend the length of the country, with elevations in the southern Talamanca Range reaching some 3,819 meters (12,530 ft.) above sea level.

The tropical location, warm offshore waters, and especially the elevation differentiate regional climates. Some lowlands record mean maximum temperatures of 30 °C (90 °F) or above, while in the heavily populated highlands, mean maximum temperatures are 20°–25 °C (70°–80 °F). The highland capital of San Jose has a temperate rather than tropical climate. Costa Rica's wet season runs from May through November; the dry season from December through April. The Caribbean plain receives rain throughout the year.

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

Unlike most of their Central American neighbors, Costa Ricans are overwhelmingly of European rather than mestizo descent. Spain is the primary country of origin. The indigenous Indian population today numbers no more than 20,000—20% less than inhabited Costa Rica when the Spanish first settled the country. Blacks, descendants of 19th-century Jamaican immigrant workers, constitute a significant English-speaking minority of about 30,000, concentrated around the Caribbean port city of Limon.

In 1502, on his fourth and last voyage to the New World, Christopher Columbus made the first European landfall in the area. Settlement of Costa Rica began in 1522, and for nearly three centuries the region was administered as part of the Captaincy General of Guatemala, under a military governor.

The Spanish optimistically called the country "Rich Coast," but the name proved inaccurate. Finding no gold or other valuable minerals in Costa Rica, but rather a resilient Indian nation resistant to Spanish exploitation, the Spanish turned to agriculture. The small landowners' relative poverty, the population's ethnic and linguistic homogeneity, and Costa Rica's isolation from the Spanish colonial centers in Mexico and the Andes all contributed to the development of an autonomous and individualistic agrarian society. This egalitarian tradition continued even after introduction of banana and coffee cultivation in the 19th century led to the accumulation of wealth with resulting class differences.

Statue of Juan Santamaria, national hero of Costa Rica, Alajuela. (Courtesy Randolph Clarke)

In 1821, Costa Rica joined other Central American provinces in a joint declaration of independence from Spain. Although the newly independent provinces formed a federation, border disputes broke out among them. Costa Rica's Guanacaste Province in the north was annexed from Nicaragua in one such regional dispute. In 1838, long after the Central American federation ceased to function in practice, Costa Rica formally withdrew and proclaimed itself a sovereign nation.

The modern era of democracy in Costa Rica began in 1889, in a change of political power that was remarkable considering the region's turbulent history and conditions. The elections of 1889, considered the first truly free and honest ones in the country's history, began a trend maintained with only a few lapses. In 1917–18, Federico Tinoco ruled as dictator, and in 1948, Jose Figueres led a popular revolution in the wake of a disputed presidential election. With more than 2,000 dead, the revolution was the bloodiest event in Costa Rican history, but the victorious junta drafted a constitution guaranteeing free elections with universal sufferage and abolishing the army. Figueres became a national hero, winning the first election under the new constitution.

Since that time, Costa Rica has held 10 presidential elections. Only twice, in 1974 and again in 1986, was the candidate of the party in power elected. The next elections are scheduled for the early 1990s.

GOVERNMENT

Costa Rica is a democratic republic with a strong system of checks and balances. Executive responsibilities are vested in a president who, though somewhat more constrained than most Latin American heads of state, is without question the center of power. The president and 57 Legislative Assembly deputies are elected for 4-year terms. A constitutional amendment approved in 1969 limits both the president and the deputies to one term, although a deputy may be returned to the assembly after sitting out a term.

The electoral process is supervised by the powerful Supreme Electoral Tribunal, a commission of three principal magistrates and six alternates selected by the Supreme Court of Justice. Judicial power is exercised by the Supreme Court of Justice, composed of 17 magistrates selected for 8-year terms by the Legislative Assembly, and subsidiary courts.

The country's seven provinces are headed by governors appointed by the president, but they exercise little power. There are no provincial legislatures. Autonomous state agencies enjoy considerable operational independence; they include the nationalized commercial banks, the state insurance monopoly, and the Social Security Agency.

Principal Government Officials

President—Oscar **Arias** Sanchez
First Vice President—Jorge Manuel **Dengo**
Second Vice President—Victoria **Garron**

Ministers
Foreign Relations—Rodrigo **Madrigal** Nieto
Agriculture—Antonio **Alvarez**
Culture—Carlos Francisco **Echeverria**
Economy and Industry—Luis Diego **Escalante**
Education—Francisco Antonio **Pacheco**
Energy and Mines—Alvaro **Umana**
Finance—Fernando **Naranjo**
Foreign Commerce—Jose Maria **Figueres**
Government and Police—Rolando **Ramirez**
Health—Edgar **Mohs**
Housing and Urban Development—Fernando **Zumbado**
Information—Guido **Fernandez**
Justice—Luis Paulino **Mora**
Labor—Edwin **Leon**
Planning—Oton **Solis**
Presidency—Rodrigo **Arias**
Public Security—Hernan **Garron**
Public Works and Transport—Guillermo **Constenla**
Science and Technology—Rodrigo **Zeledon**
President of Central Bank—Eduardo **Lizano**

Ambassador to the United States—Danilo **Jimenez**
Ambassador to the Organization of American States—Guillermo **Villalobos** Arce
Ambassador to the United Nations—Carlos Jose **Gutierrez**

Costa Rica maintains an embassy in the United States at 1825 Connecticut Ave. NW., Suite 213, Washington, D.C. 20009 (tel. 202–234–2945).

POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Throughout its history, Costa Rica's political system has contrasted sharply with its neighbors. The nation has steadily developed and maintained democratic institutions and an orderly, constitutional scheme for government succession. Several elements have contributed to this situation, including educational opportunities, enlightened government leaders, comparative prosperity, flexible class lines, and the absence of a politically intrusive military.

The National Liberation Party (PLN) has been the dominant party in Costa Rica since the election of 1948. It is a social democratic party affiliated with the Socialist International. Overall, Costa Rican governments have swung from moderately conservative to moderately progressive as the PLN and various anti-PLN coalitions have tended to alternate control of the presidency. This pattern was broken in 1974 and 1986, when a PLN candidate succeeded a PLN incumbent.

Oscar Arias Sanchez (PLN) won Costa Rica's presidential election on February 2, 1986, defeating Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) rival Rafael Angel Calderon by a seven-percentage point margin. Arias was helped at the polls by the popularity and accomplishments of his predecessor, President Luis Alberto Monge. The voters rewarded the PLN for Monge's success in stabilizing the economy after finding it in shambles from the previous Carazo administration. The PLN also won control of the Legislative Assembly, capturing 29 of the 57 seats.

The communist regime in neighboring Nicaragua is seen by many Costa Ricans as a threat to their nation's peace and opportunity to develop economically. Costa Rica has no army, relying instead on a small Civil Guard of 4,000 that patrols the borders and performs internal police functions. The Civil Guard periodically has been involved in armed incidents in the northern border region with both Nicaraguan Government forces and elements of the Nicaraguan Resistance.

Many Costa Ricans also believe that the Nicaraguan problem discourages new investment and tourism in Costa Rica and stimulates capital flight by the private sector. More than 100,000 recent Nicaraguan immigrants, many undocumented refugees, are a further burden on Costa Rica's educational and health facilities.

In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias authored a regional peace plan that became the basis for the peace agreement signed in August 1987 by the presidents of the other Central American countries, including Nicaragua. Arias' efforts earned for him the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize, but since the peace plan was signed, compliance has been minimal, and armed conflict in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala continues. To the south, Costa Rica is faced with political and economic instability in Panama.

ECONOMY

Traditionally, Costa Rica has been one of the region's strongest and most stable nations, both economically and politically. Now the country must overcome major challenges to its economic development as it recovers from a period of economic crisis and seeks to restructure the economy.

Increases in government spending in the late 1970s, coupled with higher world prices for coffee and other important Costa Rican exports, stimulated the economy, creating inflationary pressure. When coffee prices declined sharply in 1978, and petroleum import costs doubled the next year, Costa Rica's balance-of-payments deficit soared; the imbalance was financed by high-interest, short-term borrowing. Real gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 8.8% in 1982. Positive growth rates resumed in 1983 and continued through 1987.

Economic policy in Costa Rica, supported by agreements with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, aims to maintain stability and restructure the economy toward a more market-oriented, export-led growth.

Intermittent negotiations with commercial bank creditors have failed to produce an agreement on rescheduling Costa Rica's large external debt, and in mid-1988 only partial payment of interest was being made. Although the United States continues to provide major economic support to Costa Rica, President Arias has actively sought more economic assistance from other donors, including several European countries and Japan.

Costa Rica continues its efforts to industrialize and shift labor out of traditional agriculture and import-substitution industries into more productive and profitable activities. These efforts provide opportunities for continued U.S. exports and joint ventures. Investment opportunities in tourism and export industries (especially light industry and agribusiness) offer inviting returns for foreign and local entrepreneurs and promise increased prosperity for many Costa Ricans.

DEFENSE

The 1949 constitution abolished Costa Rica's army. The country now relies on Civil and Rural Guard forces of a few thousand men to maintain internal security and public order, and on the

Organization of American States and the Rio treaty to guarantee the inviolability of its borders.

The president is the commander in chief of the public security forces. The primary organization is the Civil Guard, which is under the Ministry of Public Security. It is essentially a constabulary force responsible for law and order in urban areas and for land, air, and maritime border surveillance. The secondary organization is the Rural Guard, which is under the Ministry of Government. It is responsible for performing police functions in rural areas throughout Costa Rica's seven provinces.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Costa Rica is an active member of the international community. Its record in such areas as human rights and advocacy of peaceful settlement of disputes gives it a weight in world affairs beyond its size. The country lobbied strenuously for the establishment of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and was the first nation to recognize the jurisdiction of the Inter-American Human Rights Court, which is based in San Jose. Costa Rica expressed a firm commitment to the letter and spirit of the Rio treaty.

Since 1979, Costa Rica's relations with its Central American neighbors, and its overall foreign policy, have been dominated by the situation in Nicaragua and the regional conflict. Costa Rica strongly supported the Contadora initiative, and in 1987, President Arias was instrumental in gaining approval from all the Central American presidents (including Nicaragua's) for the peace agreement signed that August in Guatemala.

Costa Rica has diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. but broke relations with Cuba in 1961 to protest Cuban support of leftist subversion in Central America.

U.S.-COSTA RICAN RELATIONS

The United States and Costa Rica have enjoyed close and friendly relations based on mutual respect for democratic government, human freedoms, social and economic rights, and other shared values. U.S. and Costa Rican views on foreign policy are not always identical:

Further Information

These titles are provided as a general indication of material published on this country. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

Bird, Leonard A. *Costa Rica: The Unarmed Democracy.* London: Sheppard, 1984.

Gayle, Dennis John. *The Small Developing State: Comparing Political Economies in Costa Rica, Singapore, and Jamaica.* Brookfield, VT: Gover Publishing Co., 1986.

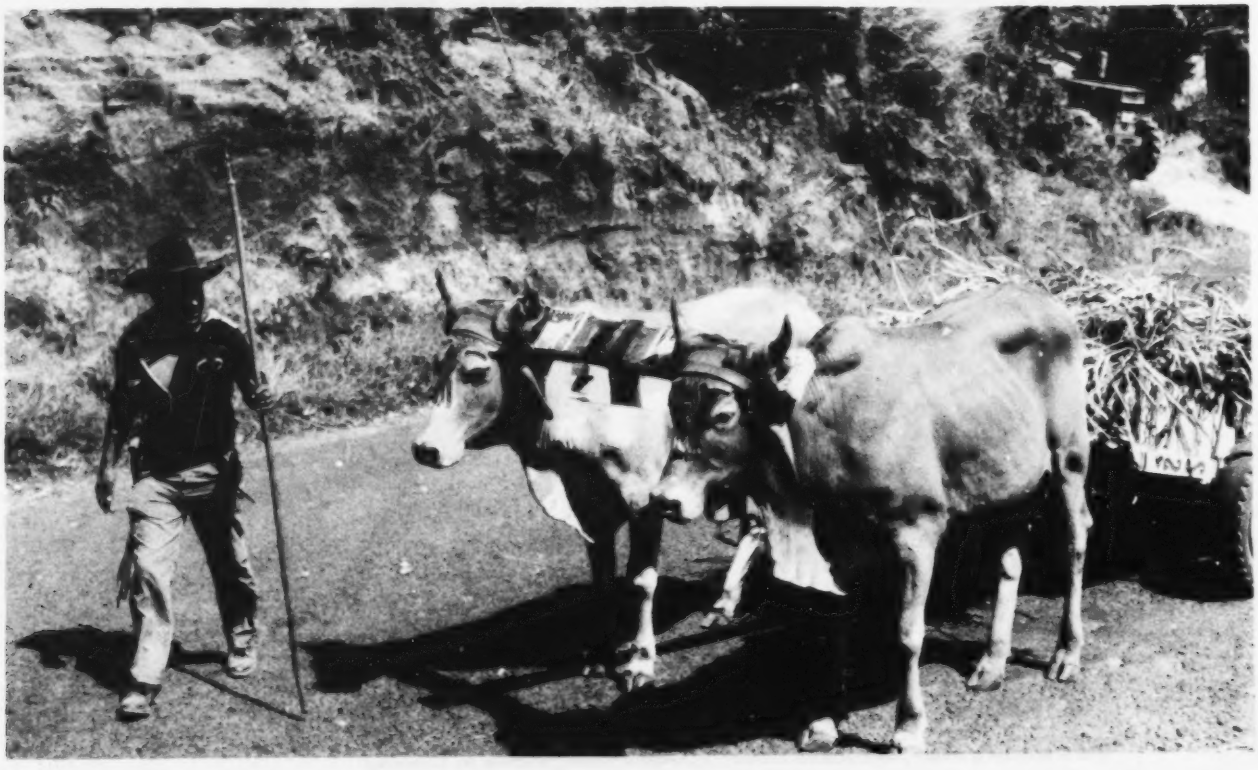
Hall, Carolyn. *Costa Rica, A Geographical Interpretation in Historical Perspective.* Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1985.

Available from the Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, 20402:

American University. *Area Handbook for Costa Rica.* 1984.

U.S. Department of Labor. *Foreign Labor Trends.* 1985–86.

For information on foreign economic trends, commercial development, production, trade regulations, and tariff rates, contact the International Trade Administration, US Department of Commerce, Washington, DC 20230 or any Commerce Department district office.



Hauling sugarcane on the road to Poas Volcano National Park. (Courtesy Randolph Clarke)

Black howler monkey, Tamarindo Estuary in Guana Caste. (Courtesy Jan K. Herman)

Costa Rica aligned itself with other Latin American countries against the U.S. position during the Falklands-Malvinas war in 1982 and against U.S. military operations in Grenada in 1983. More recently, Costa Rican officials, including President Arias, have been critical of U.S. policy in support of the Nicaraguan Resistance. Nonetheless, Costa Rica shares with the United States a strong interest in promoting democracy in Nicaragua and throughout Central America.

The United States has responded to Costa Rica's economic problems through developmental assistance programs. The Peace Corps, with some 200 volunteers, has helped develop skills in agriculture, education, health, nutrition, and natural resources development. The U.S. Agency for International Development works not only to support Costa Rican efforts to stabilize the economy in the short term but also to help broaden and accelerate agricultural and industrial growth. Low-income farmers are being helped toward self-sufficiency, and the urban poor are aided by industrial development, family planning, and increased educational opportunities.

Many other U.S. agencies, including the U.S. Information Service and the Department of Agriculture, are active in Costa Rica. More than 20,000 American private citizens, mostly retirees, live in the country.

Travel Notes

Climate and clothing: San Jose, at an altitude of 1,158 meters (3,800 feet), has an average temperature of 24 °C (75 °F). The rainy season is May–November; however, rainfall is heavier throughout the year on the Caribbean coast. Spring-weight clothing, with a sweater for cool evenings and trips to the mountains, and umbrellas are recommended.

Customs: US citizens arriving by air need a tourist card (issued by airline offices) and proof of US citizenship, or a passport (a Costa Rican visa may be necessary, depending on length and purpose of stay); onward passage; and sufficient funds for their stay. Overland travelers should carry a US passport and visas for the countries they plan to enter. No vaccinations are required.

Health: Medical services are good for most purposes. A wide range of prescription medicines is available. The most serious health hazards—diarrhea, amoebic dysentery, malaria, and typhoid—occur more frequently outside the capital. Drinking water in major San Jose hotels and restaurants is purified; outside the capital drinking water should be boiled.

Telecommunications: An automatic telephone service covers all of Costa Rica. Direct-dial service to the United States and many other countries is available. *Companía Radiografica* handles international telegrams. Costa Rica is 1 hour behind eastern standard time (daylight savings time is not observed in Costa Rica.)

Transportation: Principal cities are connected by highway, rail, or air with San Jose. Eastern Airlines, Pan American, and LACSA (the national airline) have daily flights to several US cities. San Jose has air connections to other Central American and Caribbean capitals. Within San Jose taxis are adequate, but fares should be agreed upon in advance. Buses connect all parts of the city, nearby suburbs, and other parts of the country.

Tourist attractions: Travel agencies conduct tours to the major attractions, including the Irazu and Poas volcanoes, the Sarchi Oxcart Factory (where brightly painted miniature oxcarts can be purchased), the Atlantic Zone jungle and beaches, interior rain forests, and the Pacific beaches. Within San Jose, the National Theater and the National Museum are major points of interest.

Principal U.S. Officials

Ambassador—Deane R. Hinton
Deputy Chief of Mission—John Todd Stewart
Director, AID Mission—Carl Leonard
Public Affairs Counselor (USIS)—Robert Plotkin
Economic Counselor—John Dawson
Political Counselor—Joseph F. Becelia

The U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica is located at Calle 1, Avenida 3, San Jose (tel. 33–11–55).

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